

The University of Chicago

THE NEGRO IN
THE NEW ORLEANS PRESS, 1850-1860
A STUDY IN ATTITUDES
AND PROPAGANDA

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

1939

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LAWRENCE DUNBAR REDDICK

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This essay seeks to make two modest contributions to the study of history: the one in methodology; the other in content. First, to suggest the possibilities of a quantitative-critical technique seldom employed in American historiography. Secondly, to furnish a preliminary, inductive, demonstration that the current picture of ante-bellum urban life in the southern part of the United States is inadequate and contrary to the "sources." This is particularly true when it comes to the various social types and the general intellectual environment. The generation and reflection of social attitudes in the newspapers along with the function of these media as agencies of propaganda are elements of particular interest.

In the decade preceding the Civil War, New Orleans stood forth as a distinctive American city. It was in population the sixth United States municipality, the seaport metropolis of the lower Mississippi River Valley and bore in its institutions and style of living the effects of fifty-one years of French rule, thirty-four years of Spanish rule, and the sub-tropical climate. This same decade saw desperate efforts toward "sectional nationalism" on the part of the South in resistance to the world sweep of the forces of urban industrialism and anti-slavery. As one result of the interaction of these dynamics, large areas of the traditional tolerance of New Orleans were contracted and public opinion moved definitely toward an anti-Negro mold. There were more frequent verbal attacks on the black men. Economic barriers were reared against those Negroes free. The anti-immigration and anti-intermarriage laws were now vigorously enforced. Manumission was made so tedious that it became almost impossible of achievement, and in 1859, the Legislature directed all free Negroes "to choose masters for themselves and remain slaves forever." From 1840 (the highest point) to 1860 the free colored population of New Orleans declined from 19,222 to 10,939--a drop of more than forty-three per cent. The newspapers, reflecting the sharpening

struggle, were especially influential in crystallizing this public sentiment.

The method of this study, which has been termed "quantitative-critical," first subjected the Negro items from The Daily Picayune, The New Orleans Daily Crescent, The New Orleans Bee, and The Daily True Delta to a classification survey prior to treatment according to the more usual procedures of historical and social analysis. All of the items were reduced to a code which is a number system not violated at any point. Some four hundred-odd sub-categories classified these data according to subject-matter content and other unit characteristics such as date of publication, location in the particular newspaper, length, type, and style of the individual articles. Also, on a linear continuum of equally appearing intervals, the editorials and news stories were ranked on a rough scale as either: (1) highly favorable to the Negro, (2) favorable to the Negro, (3) neutral or negligible, (4) unfavorable, or (5) highly unfavorable. In similar fashion, the items were coded for sectional bias in a North-South reference, thus: (1) very critical of the South, (2) critical of the South, (3) neutral or negligible, (4) critical of the North, (5) very critical of the North.

The newspapers reflected attitudes and served as instruments of social suggestion on four levels: (1) in the numerical distribution of subject matter content--what was printed about Negro life and Negro-white relations and what was omitted; (2) in the gross proportions of editorials and articles which were unfavorable to the Negro over against those which were favorable to him; (3) in style--that is, the manner and form of the expression. For example, there were noted fifty-one terms derogatory to the Negro such as "cuffee," "Sambo," "free buck," and "wooly heads," while no such comparable terms of eulogy were discovered. In similar fashion, "abolitionists" and "friends" of the Negro were termed "nigger worshippers" and "Uncle Tomitudes"; (4) in the creation, adoption, and circulation of certain symbols and stereotypes which when developed sufficiently in the public mind could be so variously applied and exploited that the mere mention of the symbol itself might be calculated to bring forth a chain of responses swathed in emotion and surrounded by constellations of sentiment. Some of the most common historical symbols were: John Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, Nat Turner, Horace

Greeley, William Seward, Frederick Douglass, and Hinton R. Helper. Some of the "social-situation" types were: the amalgamationist, the abolitionist, the insurrectionist, the free Negro, and the Black Republican.

Thus, may be seen the form and the function of the Negro in the New Orleans press in the decade prior to the American Civil War. In terms of statistical proportions, the 7,624 Negro items absorbed 17,094 column inches or about one-fiftieth of the total newspaper space. The Picayune, the richest and most powerful of the sheets, carried over half of all of the Negro materials and over four-fifths of the advertisements. The numerical high point of Negro items came in 1859, the low point in 1850. The year 1859 was also the peak for crime and miscellaneous news, but for advertisements, 1856. The months showed a more or less equal ratio of insertions.

The individual articles in themselves were short. Three-fourths of them were less than two column inches in length. The first three pages of the four newspapers were the most likely to display the materials relating to the colored people. There was more news than advertisement, more advertisement than exchange, more exchange than editorials, more editorials than reviews, more reviews than features, and practically no fiction. As for subject matter content, a little over 47 per cent of the 7,624 was devoted to Crime and the Law, nearly 30 per cent to Advertisements, and over 23 per cent to the miscellaneous All Other division. Within the division of Crime and the Law, the collisions with the legal structures were many and varied. There were insurrection and counterfeiting, rape and slander, miscegenation and murder, suicide and arson, assaults of persons and policemen, larceny--both petty and grand, suits for freedom and suits for property rights--all, cutting across lines of sex and race and instituting a kaleidoscopic formation and reformation of patterns.

The Advertisements for the sale of slaves, for the return of fugitives, and for the labor of Negroes--bond and free--etch in significant aspects of the social and economic life of the time and place. There were bought and sold privately, but mostly by auction, a great number of female domestics, but not so many female field hands; a great number of male field hands and common

laborers, but not so many male domestics. The number of Negro artisans was striking as was the size of some of the parcels sold. Apparently, there was a considerable exchange of plantation and industrial establishments in those days. The slave traffic, as reflected in the press, was an open and thoroughly legitimate enterprise. The human chattel was sold either in "family" units or "without reserve" as the circumstances, principally economic, dictated. There were auctions of orphans. There were auctions of Creoles. The for-hire ads show the domination of the market by the female domestic and the popularity here of the "wet nurse" and of "child labor."

The runaway ads suggest that all types of slaves from all conditions made the dash for liberty. These descriptions picture the "good looking" and the "ugly," the crafty and the fleet of foot as well as the awkward of mind and body. Though twenty-five or fifty dollars was the usual reward, sometimes the valuations ranged from five hundred to one thousand dollars. So many of the fugitives spoke French or Spanish along with English.

Aside from the crime and the advertising, there was a great preoccupation with such related topics as the free Negro, colonization, slavery, the slave trade, and the abolition movement. Universally, the free Negro was attacked. Usually, the importation of more slave Negroes and the exportation of the remaining free Negroes were advocated. Slavery, most emphatically, was defended. Abolition, without question, was denounced. There were the "scientific" and the "common sense" justifications of Negro enslavement. In addition to the major topics, there were other scattered notices which treated of the accidents and the incidents, the insanity and the voodoo, the theatre attractions and the polite social intercourse, the statistical gains and losses, and the freaks of nature. All in all, a considerable coverage.

These materials in their distributions and testimony furnish important generalizations upon the different levels of consideration.

From the standpoint of methodology, this study represents one test of an idea and a technique. The idea of examining a universe of data rather than one or several samples of them. A more tedious process, perhaps, but certainly one calculated to

give the intimacy of detail so necessary in formulating reliable conclusions as to the historical form and function of publicly expressed attitude. The quantitative-critical method employed, first, reduces to objective statement the unit characteristics of the data, then, within these distributions seeks to ascertain their internal nature. Thus, the size and shape of the materials determined by the classification survey always leaves the testimony of each document or set of documents in the proper relation to that of every other document and to the whole complex of evidence.

From the standpoint of the picture of Negro life and of Negro-white relations, even this segmental portrayal shows a richness and variety which have found little place in the historical literature. From this evidence there can be little doubt that there was a great tension in ante-bellum Negro-white relations; that the Negro slave resisted his reduction, fought back and ran away. Many of those who did not seek to break the system through insurrection or flight, sought to maintain their personalities within the system through verbal and physical assaults and the destruction of property. The free Negro, too, comes forth as a stubborn spirit. These people, evidently, were not an undifferentiated mass: some had white employees, others slaves; some were merchants and others fought duels. In the North and South, through the assistance given to runaways in flight, the "rescues" of fugitives to be returned to slavery no less than through the resolutions of their conventions, the free Negro expressed a sympathy for the slave and an antagonism to human bondage. That the North and South leaned point counter point, contesting against and denouncing each other, is a story whose general outline is well known, but the power and depth of the tremendous effort to eliminate the free Negro from the South, to drive him out of the land or into slavery, is hardly so well appreciated. The oppressions of ethnic minorities in modern Europe furnish surprising analogues.

The sex contacts chart an impulse which cut across race lines with little discrimination.

From the standpoint of the social psychological import of the materials of this study, it is clear that they reveal an anti-Negro press with a sectional bias. This is patent in the selection of news, in the advertisements inserted, and in the subject matter content of news and editorials. Though the main tendency of a great deal of the news may be classified as neutral (as the

abstract standards of journalism require), there were many more con-Negro items than pro-Negro items. The editorials, which by definition are opinion-making, very definitely demonstrated the anti-Negro, pro-Southern bias. On this score, the four newspapers may be ranked in descending order: the Crescent, the Picayune, the Bee, the True Delta. The vividness, the wit, the humor, the sarcasm, the figures of speech, the allusions, the alliterations, the catch phrases, and the other characteristics of the style of the New Orleans newspaper men further exhibit the literary technique exploited in driving home the propaganda.

Despite the harshness which the vilifications of the Negro could take, it is not to be assumed that the reporters and editors of the New Orleans press were just so many malicious devils unceasingly conjuring page after page of Negro hate out of the depths of their depraved souls. Not so. As has been seen, there were conscious suppression, distortion, the deliberate fabrication of news, and an unmistakable view toward the Negro. However, the large explanation of the attitudes and the propaganda of the New Orleans press is not to be found in the malevolence of certain individuals; rather it is to be sought in the social environment, in the relation of the newspaper and the society. Despite a certain "professional" overtone of many of the articles which suggests a kind of "tongue-in-cheek" approach, given the class and caste structures and what was doubtless considered the necessity of the hour, much of what the editors printed was considered by them to be absolutely "the truth." These editors were, after all, functionaries in a social system. The newspaper was the principal agency of communication within that system. As such it served as an instrument of control and as a shield for the protection of the culture. Here, as elsewhere, the social structures came to express themselves in the structure of assertions. Kenneth Burke has shown that language is an implement of action and it is not to be forgotten that mind itself is a social product.¹ As Doob says, "a newspaper is, without doubt, a cultural product and as such it is a reflection of a particular social environment or a portion of

¹Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change (New York: New Republic, 1935), pp. 52 ff.

that environment."² The New Orleans daily press, then, was operating along with practically all of the other institutions and agencies to conserve the status quo of the ante-bellum world.

From another angle, the Negro as an object of blame furnished social catharsis. He was to Southern life, in a more realistic sense of course, what the villains of the theatre tragedies were to ancient Greece.

Too, despite the power and success of the propaganda, it was never complete. There may be a minor tradition throughout Southern history of those Southern whites who have stubbornly resisted the prevailing attitudes toward the Negro.³ As to how many of these were present in the peace group of 1860-61, cannot be said. . . .

Some of the limitations and implications of this study are apparent. It is not to be forgotten that the generalizations of this essay, for the most part, relate to New Orleans. Their wider sweep must wait upon comparative studies in other Southern communities, rural and urban, in the same period. Again, this propaganda of the South was complemented by a propaganda of the North. The studies of Greeley's New York Tribune, The Chicago Tribune, and other such journals throw some light on this other side of the story.⁴ There is, of course, much more to be done.

In this same sense, this examining of the Negro in the news and opinion of the largest Southern city on the eve of the Civil

²Leonard W. Doob, Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1935), p. 333; George H. Mead, Mind Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), *passim*.

³Cf. Virginus Dabney, Liberalism in the South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932).

⁴Ralph R. Fahrney, Horace Greeley, the Tribune, and the Civil War (Cedar Rapids, Ia.: The Torch Press, 1936); Dorothy Dood, "Henry J. Raymond and The New York Times During Reconstruction" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1935); Tracy E. Strevey, "Joseph Medill and the Chicago Tribune During the Civil War" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1930); L. L. Tasher, "The Missouri Democrat in the Civil War" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1934); C. R. Wilson, "The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer and Civil War Politics: A study in 'Copperhead' Opinion" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1934).

War is but an attempted illumination of one discrete problem in the larger effort of scholars today to divine the origin, nature, and effect of social attitudes, public opinion, and propaganda. One wing of this research has sought to determine how national patriots are made;⁵ another has been investigating the propaganda and opinion patterns in certain national crisis periods: American Revolution, Civil War, Spanish-American War, and World War, for example.⁶ A third line of approach, intimately interlocked with the two others, is represented by those scholars who are focusing upon the origin, the history, the nature, and extent of racial attitudes.⁷ When all of these researches have proceeded apace, earnestly it is to be hoped that scholars and others shall possess a much more profound understanding of the fundamental processes of culture and life.

⁵Charles E. Merriam (ed.), The Making of Citizens (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929-33), 9 vols.

⁶Philip G. Davidson, "Revolutionary Propaganda in New England, New York, and Pennsylvania, 1763-76" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1929); Walter Millis, The Martial Spirit: A Study of Our War with Spain (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1931); M. M. Wilkerson, Public Opinion and the Spanish-American War; A Study in War Propaganda (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1932); Harold D. Lasswell, Propaganda Technique in the World War (New York: Knopf, 1927).

⁷For example, see Chicago Commission on Race Relations, The Negro in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922); George E. Simpson, The Negro in the Philadelphia Press (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936); L. D. Reddick, "Racial Attitudes in American History Textbooks of the South," Journal of Negro History, XIX (July, 1934), 225-265; Bruno Lasker, Race Attitudes in Children (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1929).

